"I never needed eyes to see": Venture creation among visually-impaired entrepreneurs

ABSTRACT

There has been a paucity of work on negative traits that may distinguish entrepreneurial success from failure. Disability is an example of a little-researched, negative trait, and blindness is often viewed as an extreme form of disability. Yet there have been blind entrepreneurs through history. How does sight loss relate with entrepreneurial activity? How do blind entrepreneurs create ventures? By observing and conversing with two blind entrepreneurs over six months, we offer preliminary answers to these questions by generating insights on processes of opportunity formation based on the entrepreneurs' adaptive skills. These insights, located in the following five areas of entrepreneurial activity, may illuminate processes of opportunity formation based on: a) Skills development, b) Origins and sources of entrepreneurial motivation, c) Empowerment of disabled people, d) Creation of unique strategies, and e) Entrepreneurial education.

Keywords: Entrepreneurs; Venture creation; Opportunity formation; Disability.

1. Introduction

Much of the entrepreneurship literature has adopted a positive, traits-based approach in distinguishing entrepreneurial success from failure. The stereotypical illustration of entrepreneurial success has implications for often narrowly defined factors in research designs, most importantly in the selection of datasets. For example, little work has examined negative traits, namely challenges that may also build success stories, but are typically ignored. Here, except for a few studies on attention deficit hyperactive disorder ("ADHD"), there remains a paucity of research on disabled entrepreneurs. Blindness is often considered as the most extreme form of disability, and to be blinded has been viewed across cultures as a form of torture equivalent to a living death (Rose, 2003, pp. 81-82). Yet blindness has inspired notable achievements. There are notable blind entrepreneurs in history, mainly social entrepreneurs such as Louis Braille and Francis Joseph Campbell. Moreover, there are blind

performers today with their own enterprises, including well-known names such as Andrea Bocelli and Stevie Wonder. While their performances have been publicly acclaimed, few questions have been asked about the role of their blindness in their performance.

"Extreme settings" (Eisenhardt, 1989) such as physically-challenged entrepreneurship may be particularly suitable to learn how entrepreneurs can overcome significant social and economic barriers. This is because physical disabilities have played a major economic and cultural role in many societies. For example, Homer and Milton were thought to have produced their epic poems because of acute insights from their sight loss (Drake, 1814). Our study reflects this western classical thinking wherein blindness is a condition that poses extreme physical challenges. Moreover, blindness raises persistent, lifelong challenges as there is no cure. In this grim scenario, how does sight loss relate with entrepreneurial activity? How do blind entrepreneurs create new ventures?

For our first research question, ex-ante, we identified two mechanisms that may help to address this question. Above all, physical and mental disability hinders employability (Jones & Latreille, 2011). Consequently, blind entrepreneurs are often self-employed. However, the need for self-employment does not explain the activities of blind entrepreneurs. We know there is a long history of this phenomenon, and yet we know little about blind entrepreneurship as knowledge of venture creation continues to be based on the experiences of physically and mentally healthy individuals (Kašperová & Kitching, 2014). Physically-challenged entrepreneurs would therefore need to overcome social and economic barriers, in addition to their physical hurdles, in coping with a sighted world. Blind entrepreneurs who successfully negotiate these hurdles may have developed coping strategies that minimize the constraining effects of their challenges (Breton and Le Breton-Miller-2017). Some of these challenges could be turned into strengths (Carver et al., 1989; Starr and Fondas, 1992), for example by leveraging public concern with diversity and equality to promote disabled employment (Binc.).

This latter point is closely related to an ex-ante explanation of our second research question. Generally, the loss of partial physical functions may be viewed as an "incomplete" challenge. Yet the fact that partially disabled people have faced significant challenges and then develop coping mechanisms (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2017) suggests the development of new cognitive techniques to address challenges with solutions that were not previously explored. One reason for this gap in problem solving could be in a paucity of skills and experimental space to solve persistent social and economic problems (Zahra et al., 2006). In this scenario, fresh, socially adapted skills of blind entrepreneurs may be able to generate unique competitive strategies.

2. Methods

2.1 Data Collection

Based on our research questions, we sought to learn how the entrepreneurial activities of visually-impaired entrepreneurs related to their visual impairment. We explored the rationale and interest in some of the activities that blind entrepreneurs pursued, and the way(s) they were challenged in these activities by their blindness. We drew on an exploratory research design to observe the activities of blind entrepreneurs and to converse with them formally and informally over an unbroken six-month period from September 2017. This design involved a grounded approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which the authors observed the activities of, and interacted with, two Eire-based visually-impaired ("VI") entrepreneurs as cases of serial, blind entrepreneurship. The design, which seemed sensible in view of the paucity of any data on blind entrepreneurs, drew qualitative research techniques from Glaser and Strauss (1967), such as theoretical sampling. Here the pilot's small dataset of conversations and meetings notes drove inductive understanding of an identifiable process of creating a number of ventures set up by the two entrepreneurs.

In the pilot, the authors sought to gain knowledge of the entrepreneurs' rationale and interest in selecting possible activities for implementation by one-on-one discussions with the entrepreneurs, usually in real time (Atkinson and Coffey, 2003). With both blind entrepreneurs, the authors learned

about the entrepreneurs' activities by first gaining their confidence as a trustworthy sounding board for their views (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). Additionally, from field notes of project team meetings and weekly discussions of projects with each of the two entrepreneurs, the researchers begun to compare the data by moving back and forth from features of Miller and Le Breton-Miller's (2017) challenge-based model to the data in articulating the nature and process of a sight-challenged form of opportunity formation within the operating contexts of the entrepreneurs. In this process of articulation, we acknowledge our co-creation of the entrepreneurs' stories that we then discuss. One way to explain this research stance would be to suggest that readers consider multiple readings of the data beyond our interpretation of the findings below (Woolgar, 1988). We suggest how our portrait of two entrepreneurs who have drawn on their challenges to create ventures offers generalizable insights for venture creation that entrepreneurship and other readers may then connect in their own ways.

2.2 Data: Two Stories

The first entrepreneur (VI-1) is a white Irishman who was blind in one eye at an early age from a birth defect. He gradually lost sight in the other eye and became legally blind (defined as at least 80% visual impairment) in his early twenties. Since 2010, VI-1 has also become paraplegic and confined to a wheelchair following an accident that resulted from his blindness. VI-1's activities grew in number and focus following this accident. Between 2015 and 2017 he launched four commercial ventures to raise funds specifically to find a cure for the physical disabilities of paraplegics such as himself. One of these ventures, in collaboration with a local university, was established to improve mobility for paraplegics by stem cell transplant, while another venture offered paraplegics temporary mobility by wearing a bodysuit that enabled movement from paralyzed legs:

> "I started ramping up my activities after my fall. It took two years for my body to recover and then another two years mentally. So it was around 2015 when I was able to think clearly again. When I did I thought I'm still alive by some miracle but I can't live a proper life as I've now got a full-time carer and I can't do the simplest things on my own. For the

first time in my life I felt disabled. I lost sight in one eye when I was five and I was told to look after my other eye and keep away from contact sports. This constraint spurred me on to be adventurous and different which I obviously was. So I went to college and got into rowing pretty intense. In my 20s I lost sight in my other eye, but this didn't hold me back. I wanted to show I could still do the things I did when I was sighted. I carried on rowing and started adventure trekking and mountaineering. I went to the Himalayas and did both Poles. But all this was shattered when I fell. I couldn't do anything after my fall. I needed to fix my disability. To do so I started a few ventures to raise funds etc., but I hadn't anticipated the most basic problems. One of these problems was getting volunteers: Why would anyone work with someone who couldn't work? Moreover, we were broke. Before my fall I was in a lab overseeing experiments, but I spent all my savings on rehab after falling. So it was a new chapter in my life when I got paralyzed. But I was sure this wasn't going to be a dark chapter. I was going to get myself and others with paralysis on our feet. I raised money for stem cell research and produced a kind of bionic suit that paraplegics could wear to walk around. The research continues to explore how to reverse paralysis. Because paralysis just kills you. The activities you asked about are all related to these ventures. Back in 2015 I was known more an adventurer than an entrepreneur, and because of this fact and because some of our activities were new, people weren't rushing to invest. But the more obstacles that cropped up, the more I wanted to see through my ideas. To achieve this, I clicked that my disabilities could actually be my biggest asset. If I could sell my story publicly and put my disabilities at the center of this story then people might get hooked on what I had to say. I didn't like talking about myself. But I put together a story of how I'd used my disabilities to build new lives for paraplegics. Within this story, my role was to find financial backers for my ventures. The movie and TED talk have become crucial for this activity."

(VI-1, compilation of conversation notes, May-October 2017)

By contrast, the pilot's second participant (VI-2) is a white Irishwoman who was born sighted. However, VI-2 carried a genetic condition that caused her to become blind in her mid-twenties. In conversations with the authors, she said that she schooled with sighted children and began working as a sighted person in an international corporation. She then left this employment when she started to lose her sight. VI-2 set up a number of social ventures dedicated to improving the employment of all disabled people. Because of these public activities, VI-2 has become known internationally as a paid speaker and fund-raiser for ventures that raise awareness of the employability of disabled people. While VI-1 continued with an adventurous lifestyle despite his blindness, we researched VI-2 because she suffered significant sight loss following a sighted early life and a well-paid consulting role. All this changed with her blindness, which prompted her to pursue a new, social calling. VI-1 too suffered a life-changing experience, although this experience, of his passion to cure paraplegia, followed from his catastrophic fall when he could no longer conduct his adventurous lifestyle. VI-1 and VI-2 therefore form contrasting cases of blind entrepreneurs with early sight loss, on the one hand, and late, sudden blindness, on the other. We consider the implications of this difference in our *Discussion*:

> "My funding generally knew me as a colleague who had worked well with them [as an executive in a management consulting firm]. I grew up sighted and did the normal things as a sighted kid through my teens. I went to college and graduated and got a great job. But then I got undone. I lost sight and in a very short time I couldn't see. I had to resign. However, I learned to embrace this condition. I changed because of my blindness. I saw there were lots of blind and disabled people who couldn't get employment. I became passionate about the fact most of these people couldn't get a job. In my blindness, I saw how insane it was that there are over a billion physically disabled people who are totally healthy; and yet most of these people have no job. I did not need eyes to see this, and when I lost sight I could see lots of things that many sighted people don't see. Like the 285 million blind people who are quite employable.

> My main [social] ventures are therefore about creating employment opportunities for disabled people worldwide and about showing sighted companies how disabled employees can be a very valuable resource. For example, foresight is a skill many disabled people have. Why? Because they've suffered all their lives many disabled people have gained a sharp sense of how to avoid mistakes. Companies could use this skill to significantly reduce strategic mistakes. Recruitment is one such area for this skill. Disabled employees could impact hugely in large companies because they can work naturally and independently in a range of support services. So they can bring unusual foresight to these roles. Foresight means recruiting people with the grit to succeed but who aren't always impressive at interview. You listen to the character behind the words and put together an image of the guy's fit with the role. You focus on his attitude and not his presentation. I got respect for my foresight and those were the people I called on for funding and networking."
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> (VI-2, compilation of conservation notes, February-June 2017)

2.3 Data Analysis

Our data suggested that the two entrepreneurs embarked on a process of challenge-based entrepreneurship principally by calling on their disabilities as a unique resource for building market support for their ventures. Firstly, the challenges faced by VI-1 and VI-2 did not merely prompt the development of adaptive needs and subsequently the creation of entrepreneurial skills (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2017). Instead, the primarily social experiences each entrepreneur faced consequent upon their disabilities proved to be a vital resource that both entrepreneurs returned to when they needed venture funding and networks, initially in launching their ventures, and then in sustaining their public impact. The use of their respective challenges as marketing resources for venture funding and development potentially changes the nature of social challenges for blind entrepreneurs as VI-1 and VI-2 exploited market perception of their blindness as a severe disability to capture public attention

for new venture funding. In this scenario, challenges were drawn on whenever the entrepreneurs required to craft stories for their audiences, with different emphasis on different challenges in crafting either the bionic suit story for VI-1, or the disabled employability narrative for corporates.

Secondly, drawing on their respective networks, the ventures that each entrepreneur then chose to pursue contained several features. These features were primarily based on the entrepreneur's personal experiences of disabilities that had inspired them to create new ventures. However, both entrepreneurs were acutely aware of their need to present distinctive skills of disabled people that were clearly related to their disabilities in order to convince a skeptical market to fund their ventures. VI-1 and VI-2 developed specific skills that they thought would produce effective outcomes to address their personal condition and/or life experiences. Moreover, the two entrepreneurs applied their respective personal skills to alter their ventures' strategic and marketing approaches to adapt to, and capture, changes typically in perception and preferences of the wider market to support their ventures' disabled projects. This ambitious appeal to the wider market beyond disability contrasts with the personal networks perspective of entrepreneurial behavior where entrepreneurs are thought to have limited knowledge of their product market based on eclectic information channels (Patel & Fiet, 2009) and constrained financial means and networks (Sarasvathy, 2001).

Accordingly, the market-oriented focus of the two blind entrepreneurs' skills appears to have altered their adaptive, "coping" responses to challenging personal experiences by reacting to changing/changed preferences of their sighted audiences. The skills that the two experienced entrepreneurs developed of (sighted) market behavior appears therefore to have prompted them to adapt differently to their experiences; and this skills-based capability as experienced entrepreneurs has, in turn, produced distinct experiences of their challenges as blind entrepreneurs.

Thirdly, the nature of new venture creation undertaken by each entrepreneur differed fundamentally based on the nature of their sight loss. For VI-1 his early sight loss and gradual deterioration of his sighted eye reinforced an adventurous personality trait where he appeared to defy

his blindness by participating in physically demanding team sports in competition with sighted colleagues. This defiance deepened when VI-1 suffered blindness and he could no longer participate in team sports. In response to and despite his blindness, VI-1 engaged in individual extreme pursuits. All his activities ceased abruptly when VI-1 was paralyzed by an accident that resulted from his blindness. When he recovered and found that he could no longer pursue his adventurous lifestyle, he began creating charitable and for-profit ventures to enable him and other paraplegics to walk again.

By contrast, VI-2 was inspired to launch a number of social ventures to raise awareness of disabled unemployment following her own, sudden sight loss in her late twenties. While this experience compelled the loss of her City job and an immediate change of career, VI-2 quickly learned to use her experience positively. Because of her own experience of unemployment as a blind professional, she established international social ventures that have sought to raise substantial donations for skills development among disabled people and to demonstrate their value, as disabled people, to prospective employers. VI-2 was therefore motivated to embark on this journey *because* of her sudden blindness, and she created ventures in disability awareness as a personal, high-impact response to her blindness. We present these findings diagrammatically:

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3. Discussion

Although our study's findings require substantiation, a number of potentially important implications come to mind in understanding the little-researched topic of disabled entrepreneurship. In turn, learning of blind (and disabled) entrepreneurship may produce knowledge of several growing areas of entrepreneurial activity with burgeoning questions and few answers, such as entrepreneurship education, which we discuss at the end of this section. Perhaps most striking from our findings was that the venture creation process of both entrepreneurs was *not* driven by a self-employment motive. The ventures created by the two entrepreneurs involved high-risk projects with little perceptible

financial return. Instead, the persistent way in which our entrepreneurs continued to cope with the ordinary requirements of a "sighted" world (such as having to perform at interviews- VI-2) exposed a determination to produce impactful ideas consequent upon either their paraplegia or blindness.

For our entrepreneurs, the debilitating nature of their condition was viewed as a positive, motivating factor. Hence, visual impairment became the basis for generating new opportunities, and the desire of both entrepreneurs for new venture creation drove the identification of impactful ideas. Here their entrepreneurial spirit seemed to originate from, and draw on, the suddenness of the "disabilities" that spurred each of the two entrepreneurs to create ideas, namely, VI-1's paraplegia, when he felt suddenly disabled, and VI-2's sudden, late blindness. VI-2's view that she "never needed eyes to see" then became an inspirational epithet for the employment of blind people (Casey, 2010).

By contrast, VI-1 pursued physical adventures that defied his early sight loss, and his most ambitious ventures were motivated by the physical burden of paralyzed limbs. While VI-1's blindness was incurable, his paraplegia from an accident that resulted from his blindness was more likely to secure a treatment for recovery during his lifetime. Thus, following his paraplegia, VI-1's entrepreneurial energies were focused on finding a cure for paralysis that he viewed merely as a temporary constraint for his adventure lifestyle. Accordingly, both VI-1 and VI-2 found motivation for new venture creation *only* when they suffered, respectively, extreme disability and blindness that compelled a change of lifestyle. There was however a notable difference in the connection between their respective disability and entrepreneurial activity: Whereas VI-1 did not accept the permanence of his paraplegia and sought to reverse it, VI-2 was inspired to pursue radically new activities. It seemed to follow therefore that were VI-1 to successfully reverse his paraplegia, then his entrepreneurial passion would decline. For VI-2 however, her blindness seemed to liberate a new, permanent social calling on behalf of the world's disabled. Here, potentially, it also seemed to follow that scholars and managers in and beyond entrepreneurship have more to learn from the "foresight" of VI-2 than the personal interests of VI-1, which involved repairing a debilitating but repairable

condition. That foresight potentially links sudden blindness as a negative trait with creative outcomes of opportunity formation, for example in the identification of a little-known talent network of disabled people (Casey, 2017).

For both entrepreneurs however, their respective conditions inspired expansive entrepreneurial endeavor that seemed to pay little attention to social norms for blind people, such as their traditional employment in low-paid, menial work. Instead, our conversations and observations have yielded insights on processes of opportunity formation based on the adaptive skills of the two sampled blind entrepreneurs in exploiting, as opposed to passively responding to, their challenges. The well-developed, market-oriented adaptability to their own, changed lives suggests that blind entrepreneurs can throw light on processes in which valuable goods and services are produced for targeted end-users, specifically for physically challenged and/or socially disadvantaged people that entrepreneurship scholars know little about (Alvarez et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2008), but who, in aggregate, comprise over 20% of the global population (Binc.).

In this context of challenged entrepreneurship, the paper's principal contribution is in suggesting how blind entrepreneurs may offer insights across cultures and environments in at least five areas of entrepreneurial activity, by: a) Shedding light on generic processes of skills adaptation and development, b) Illuminating the origins and sources of entrepreneurial motivation, c) Helping to empower disabled and disadvantaged people, d) Providing examples of how unique strategies are created without blind entrepreneurship serving merely as an example of social diversity and tolerance, and by e) Offering new areas of study in entrepreneurial education.

Firstly, blind entrepreneurship may involve an identifiable, homogenous process of skills adaptation and development. This process may shed light on how game-changing ideas among blind entrepreneurs may be created systematically. To achieve this goal, further studies of processes of blind entrepreneurship may be conducted by exploring "formative characteristics" and "entrepreneurial skills" that enable visually impaired entrepreneurs to overcome persistent challenges of a sighted

world. We have suggested how these entrepreneurs may feature traits such as a personal passion (VI-1) or social calling (VI-2) from unexpected, sudden experiences that could enable them to overcome extreme challenges. Here, research on mental disability has attributed emotional symptoms of ADHD (e.g. impulsivity) as a potential factor in triggering entrepreneurial activity (Wiklund et al., 2016). Similarly in our study, apparent disabilities, whether from paralysis (VI-1), or sudden sight loss (VI-2), triggered a rush of entrepreneurial activity. A notable difference, however, among our blind entrepreneurs was that the persistence of entrepreneurial activity depended at least partly on the reversibility of their disability, which weakened exploratory, opportunity-seeking behavior once an attempt was made to reverse the disability.

Furthermore, our study contributes to emerging research on the empowerment of disabled people. For example, Lorenzo et al. (2007) reports on a community project in South Africa to overcome employment barriers. VI-2 worked on a similar mission to reconceive the public view of disability as a limiting factor. Such factors become critical for employability when they render disabled people useful and trainable. Yet, little in our research indicates that the entrepreneurial success of our entrepreneurs is inimitable. Accordingly, we have presented two examples of disabled social entrepreneurs who were motivated by the way they became disabled. These entrepreneurs drew on their motivation by creating strategies to leverage their disabilities as resources for their ventures (Borzaga & Defourney, 2004; Mair & Marti, 2006). Building on a non-financial motivation view of social ventures, we have then suggested that social ventures may develop either from a change in priorities to a high-impact organization or from a desire to reverse the founder's undesirable condition.

This learning of the ways that sudden sight loss may motivate a change in priorities resonates with a number of fields including entrepreneurship education. Here, knowledge of potentially different approaches to new venture creation among disabled entrepreneurs may prove extremely deep among entrepreneurship students who are trained to develop and launch innovative ventures (Kuratko, 2005). Entrepreneurship scholars now know that entrepreneurship education can have a significant,

measurable impact in creating both more and better entrepreneurs (Martin et al., 2013). Accordingly, the innovativeness and motivation suggested by our two entrepreneurs may form an important part, for example, of a psychology-driven framework of attributes that can predict future success in new venture creation (Kickul & Gundry, 2002). Moreover, the creative problem-solving focus of blind entrepreneurs may offer salutary lessons for entrepreneurship scholars and practitioners as their permanent disability compels them to seek innovative solutions to life-and-death problems of mobility (VI-1) and employability (VI-2). Processes in which blind entrepreneurs build entrepreneurial skills, such as in creative thinking and use of technology (Kuratko, 2005) to survive and thrive in a sighted world could therefore become embedded in entrepreneurship education.

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